

Dr. Sydney T. Chapman unveiling the Harriet Martineau plaque at The Knoll, Ambleside, Cumbria.



Belated recognition for Lakes writer

In her time, Harriet Martineau was probably Ambleside's most celebrated local resident.

The Wordsworths came for tea, and the Brontës came to stay in her home at The Knoll, Rydal Road, and she was one of the nation's most celebrated political economist and writers in the middle of the last century.

But despite her fame and influence at the time, her popularity dwindled after her death in 1876; and it has taken more than 100 years for the world to acknowledge her achievements, due largely to Ambleside bookshop assistant Mrs Gill Stables who works for Mr Fred Holdsworth.

Earlier this year the feminist publishing house, Virago Press, held a competition in "The Bookseller" inviting readers to submit the name of any Virago authoress whose house or home was unmarked by any commemorative plaque.

Gill suggested that Virago should honour Harriet Martineau — and they agreed that her house at The Knoll should be marked with a green plaque, much like the blue plaques

that commemorate many famous men. And so, in weather that Miss Martineau would have found very familiar, a plaque was unveiled last Tuesday in pouring rain at The Knoll, the house that she had built and spent the last 30 years of her life in.

The plaque was unveiled by Dr Sydney Chapman, Librarian and Custodian of the Armitt Library in Ambleside, which houses not only many of Miss Martineau's books, but a plaster cast of her hand and a death mask also. Virago Press, who have re-published her novel "Deerbrook" and the two volumes of her autobiography, also presented Mrs Stables with a cheque for £100 for helping them to publicise Harriet Martineau.

The Knoll is now the home of Mr and Mrs John Smith, and among the guests at the champagne ceremony were past residents of the house, and the painters Claude Harrison and his wife Audrey Johnson, who have not only painted covers for Virago books, but also found the painting which is now reproduced on the front of "Deerbrook".

● Dr Sydney Chapman (right), Librarian of The Armitt Library in Ambleside which houses a collection of Harriet Martineau memorabilia, presenting a £100 cheque to Mrs Gill Stables of Fred Holdsworth Books as her prize in the Virago Green Plaques Competition, after officially unveiling a plaque last Tuesday in memory of writer Harriet Martineau on the house which she built at The Knoll, Rydal Road, Ambleside. The competition, run by Virago Press, invited booksellers to find a house where a Virago Classics author had once lived but which was not marked by a plaque. With them outside the author's former home are Miss Alexandra Pringle, Editor of the Virago Modern Classics; and the present inhabitants of the house, Mr and Mrs John and Annie Smith.